

## THE TWO SALOMES.

XIX.

"AS FOR ME, I LOVE HIM NOT."

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It was Moore's voice that called. Salome, standing by the kerosene lamp stove, watching the leaping of some broth, heard it. She did not move, save that her hand trembled slightly as she took the spoon from the liquid.

"Salome," said Mrs. Gerry from the bed. She turned quickly. It was the first time her mother had spoken since she had said that she wished to respect her daughter. Mrs. Gerry's intent gaze was on the girl. She beckoned feebly. In an instant Salome was bending over her. "Wasn't that Mr. Moore?" she whispered.

"Yes." "Was that true that you told me?" "It was true. I didn't dream it," with an anxious wishfulness that was hard for the girl to bear and see.

"I told you," she answered, bearing up bravely. "Does Mr. Moore know?" "Oh, no, no."

"You must tell him."

Salome held up her head as she answered: "Very well."

"Do you mean that you will tell him? Remember, it will not be fair to let him marry you—let him think you are very different from what you really are."

As they talked the young man's voice could be heard outside. He was speaking with Mr. Maine. "I understand," said Salome, still with her head down. "But what am I, really?"

Mrs. Gerry could not answer. She moved her head feebly from side to side on the pillow. "Is the broth ready?" she asked.

Salome brought the broth and gave it with the utmost tenderness, as she did everything for her mother.

Still there was some bitterness in her eyes, and her lips were pressed together. That fire of resentment that she should be considered so wicked was still smoldering in her consciousness.

Yes, certainly, Moore ought to know what a wretch he wished to marry. It had all the time been in the bottom of her mind that she would tell him. Still, with a closer compression of the lips, Miss Nunnally was probably right when she advised silence. Of course it was great folly that she, after committing a crime, should wish to proclaim it. Such a thing should be kept securely locked. Somehow it seemed to Salome that she ought to be able to find some one who would not be shocked; some one who, on being informed of this deed, should smile and remark that it was not worth being troubled about. For that was the way the girl regarded what she had done.

The hot drink stimulated Mrs. Gerry. When she had drunk it she held out her arms to the girl, smiling hopefully at her. The mother could not bear to see her child suffering.

"We have each other, you know," said the mother with something of her old courage. "And I am sure I am better."

Salome kept her head down beside her mother. "You don't respect me," she said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

Mrs. Gerry winced. She did not reply. Moore now appeared in the open doorway. The sight of him had always been something like a tonic to Mrs. Gerry, but she could not look at him now. His voice was cheery and hopeful as he made his usual inquiries. But by the time he had finished speaking his mood had changed. He stepped quickly to the bedside. He raised Salome only as she rested on his arm, but he looked only at Mrs. Gerry as he asked:

"Has anything happened? Are you worse?" "I am better," was the reply.

Then Mrs. Gerry acted upon a sudden impulse. She did not quite trust Salome's resolution; and she was not even sure that the girl had made a resolution.

"Salome has something to tell you," she said. The girl withdrew herself from Moore and stood apart.

The young man was acutely alarmed. "It is something about that big, black-looking fellow who came down with Mrs. Gerry," was what he thought.

He had known, by intuition rather than by perception, that Reid looked Salome. Was she entangled with that man? Moore braced himself as if against an onslaught of physical pain. He thrust his hands into his pockets and shut them there.

Salome went to the foot of the bed and grasped the crosspiece.

She was thinking that if her mother heard her, she would believe. And already Salome had experienced a little of that emotion which comes when one's word is not fully taken. It is probable that even a hardened liar wishes to be believed when speaking the truth.

Moore looked at her. The sight of her face was like the cut of a knife to him. His whole nature rose up to protect her.

He took a step toward her. A slight gesture from her kept him from advancing.

"No mind," he said hurriedly. "Don't tell me anything."

Salome hesitated. She glanced at her mother. But her mother's eyes did not release—they upheld and stimulated her.

"I tell you it is not of the least consequence," cried Moore, unable to prevent himself from reiterating his assurance. "Let us wait. Any other time will do. Why should you suffer so, Salome?"

His voice had a restraining tenderness that was very harrowing for the girl to hear.

A rush of feeling came over her. Why reveal anything? Was not the idea absurd? Why try to be so ridiculously honorable?

And yet— She turned more fully toward Moore. No, she would not retreat. There was something in her that would now have made her go forward, even without her mother's influence.

She kept her eyes on Moore's face. It seemed an impossible thing to do, but it was still more impossible not to watch for every expression that should come to that countenance. If he tried to deceive her by his words, she knew that he could not deceive her with his face. He would want to be kind. She was sure of that.

She clung to the crosspiece at the foot of the bed.

"You know I always told you I didn't care about right and wrong," she began.

Moore nodded. He was so bewildered. There must be something really the matter, however. He could feel something dreadful in the air.

Salome's voice went on now quickly. And she never once took her eyes from his face.

She told her story in the fewest possible words. She saw everything that came into the man's countenance. When she had said the last word she walked up to Moore and caught sharp hold of his arm, still looking at him. But she did not speak. She laughed lightly.

She went to the door, while he gazed at her. She stopped in the doorway a moment. As she stood there the sound came and placed himself beside her, licking her hand. She did not notice him. She noticed nothing but the man's face.

Presently she laughed again. As Mrs. Gerry heard the desolation in that laugh she started up quickly and tried to leave the bed. But she fell back.

"You are like my mother, Mr. Moore," said the girl. "You cannot respect me."

And now she walked away.

She removed herself from his hold and sat down quickly.

"You are like my mother," she repeated with a painstaking accuracy, as if she feared that she should miss a word. "You cannot respect me."

Moore stood still. He had a frantic sense of helplessness. And into his tumultuous distress there came a remembrance of what this girl had said to him more than once of how he would perhaps some time say to him that he wished that he had loved some one else.

He could not think clearly. The overmastering impulse upon him was that he must take Salome in his arms; that he must be more gentle, more tender than he had ever been.

He was gazing at her with eager entreaty. He did not know that Mrs. Gerry had not ceased to look at him since Salome began to speak. He stepped to the girl's side and put his hand on the back of her chair, bending over her. She rose immediately.

"I want to be out of doors," she said. "I want to be under the sky."

He moved away and let her go.

He sat down in the chair she had left and covered his face with his hands as he had before.

He was not thinking anything about whether he respected her or not. His whole consciousness was full of tenderness, and of longing to help. He wondered why she would not let him come near her.

Then, like the uncoiling of a snake, came the question, Did he respect her?

He started up in the unbearable agony of that inquiry.

"Mr. Moore," said Mrs. Gerry's voice from the bed, "will you go away now?"

Moore went mechanically to the bed. He stood there hesitating an instant in a bewildered manner. But it was not in a mechanical way that he stooped and kissed Mrs. Gerry's cheek.

"I shall come back," he said; "I shall come back in an hour or two. Perhaps we have dreamed this."

He tried to smile as he spoke. Then he walked quickly away. He saw standing by the banana tree the figure of Salome with the hound just at her hand.

She saw him, but she made no sign.

As Moore walked on he recalled some of the remarks he had made when talking about that man in Tampa who had forged his friend's signature.

At this memory Moore shook himself fiercely as if he might awaken.

But he could not awaken. He went on thinking steadily of that man. He would, no doubt, be sentenced for a term of years. Yes, for a term of years. What kind of a nature was it which could do such a thing?

Moore's mind floundered on among horrible questions, his love making each question a separate, stinging wound.

He had seen people suffer in his life. He had imagined, as the hitherto untried youth, that he knew what suffering was. But this hour told him that he did not know.

And most of all, he thought, was the sense of confusion of growing in the dark.

Salome must be very different from what he had believed her to be. Very different, or she could never, under any stress, have forged a name. How was he to adjust himself to this new Salome who had within her the capability of doing a mean crime? He must not shirk the words; a mean crime. Didn't she have any moral sense? Had she really meant all she had told him about not caring?

Moore stumbled on through the sand. How curiously she had talked about that man in Tampa! And he had believed all the time that she spoke so because of her kind heart.

The young man paused when he was at some distance from the cabin. He threw back his shoulders, inhaled a deep breath. He could not yet rid himself of the idea that this was something which would presently vanish. It is so difficult for us to believe that a terrible trouble may come to us. To others it may come naturally, but not to us.

Having stood for a moment with that vague air that is so often indicative of suffering, Moore began to walk on again.

His whole mind was now engaged in an attempt at a readjustment of his ideas concerning Salome. He felt that his heart was the same. The complexity of the girl's character had given a keen zest to his acquaintance with her always.

He had known that he did not understand her. It was going to be one of the delights of his life to learn to understand her. But that talk of hers which was so pleasant, had had a flavor so unlike that of any other woman whom he had known, was this possibility in her one of the delights of such words? And her face? The enchanting, unguessable possibilities of her face? No, no; it could not be. To be able to do what she had confessed, that must require a kind of person quite different from the person whom he loved.

But he loved her. Oh, yes, he loved her. He turned and looked back at the cabin. He saw her still standing by the banana, with the hound by her side. It required all his self-restraint to enable him to remain away from her. He was, however, quite sure that she did not wish him to return now.

She had looked at him so strangely. Could she possibly count his love? He had never loved her so strongly as now. And now there was an almost intolerable element of pity, a pity which seemed, indeed, to be made up of tenderness.

He was not thinking these things, apparently, he was feeling them.

And all at once it was simply impossible for him to resist the desire to hasten back to her. But he had not gone a dozen steps before she turned and glanced toward him. She waved him back with her hand.

Still he went on. He was telling himself that nothing should keep him from her now.

Just at that moment Miss Nunnally came walking along the cart path from the city. She was with a short distance away. He paused in his walk, staring rather than glancing at her.

She also paused instantly. A flash of something passed over her face.

"Mrs. Gerry—" she began. Moore made one fruitless attempt to speak before he was able to say:

"She is no worse."

"Oh," whispered Portia in thankfulness.

Then she came nearer.

"You know about it, then?" she said.

Moore, groping for some foothold, turned toward her eagerly.

"Yes," he answered.

There was so much sympathy and kindness on Miss Nunnally's face that the young man extended his hand, moved by that spontaneous wish for contact with a kindly human being, which is so natural to us.

The girl put her hand in his, but instantly withdrew it.

"Did she tell you?" she asked.

And again Moore said "Yes."

Miss Nunnally stood silent. But there was a distinctly felt consolation to Moore in the presence of one who was so plainly so on rapport with him.

It has been said of him that he was one who asked and found help from feminine human nature. It was not like him to suffer or enjoy in silence and alone.

"She was wrong," at last said Miss Nunnally.

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